Childeric I

(c. 457 – c. 481)

BRIEFING

Childeric I (died 481 AD) was a Frankish leader in the northern part of imperial Roman Gaul and a member of the Merovingian dynasty, described as a king (Latin *rex*), both on his Roman-style seal ring, which was buried with him, and in fragmentary later records of his life. He was father of Clovis I, who acquired effective control over all or most Frankish kingdoms, and a significant part of Roman Gaul.

BIOGRAPHY

Most of early Merovingian history is based on the account of the 6th-century Gregory of Tours. The date of Childeric's accession is not given in the text, but it was after emperor Avitus' death in December 456. The only certain date is the Battle of Vouillé in 507; most of Gregory's other statements are contradictory.

Childeric's father is recorded by several sources to have been Merovech, after whom the dynasty is named. Gregory says that Merovech was reputed by some to be a descendant of Chlodio, an earlier Frankish king who had conquered Gaulish areas first in the Silva Carbonaria, then in Tournai, Cambrai and as far south as the Somme. This is roughly the definition of the Roman province of *Belgica Secunda* (approximately the "Belgium" defined by Julius Caesar centuries earlier, the region stretching from north of Paris to the Flemish coast); later, a letter of Saint Remigius to Childeric's son Clovis I implies that Childeric had been its administrative chief.

Childeric himself is mainly associated with Roman military actions around the Loire River involving the Gallo-Roman general Aegidius. According to Gregory, Childeric was exiled to "Thuringia" for eight years due to Frankish distaste for his debauchery and his seduction of his subjects' daughters. In the meantime, according to Gregory, Aegidius himself took up the title of king of the Franks. Upon his return from exile, Childeric joined his host's wife, Queen Basina, who bore their son Clovis.

Guy Halsall connects the story to Roman politics, Aegidius being an appointee of Majorian:

> Although this is only one interpretation of the fragmentary sources, an eight-year period ending with Aegidius' death would allow us to associate Childeric's expulsion with Majorian's accession and appointment of Aegidius. ... Majorian's commander on the Loire, Aegidius, refused to accept Severus as emperor. It is possible that, to legitimise his position, he took the title king of the Franks.

Halsall (p. 269) speculates that Childeric probably began a Roman military career in the service of Flavius Aetius who defeated Attila in Gaul, and he points out that much of his military career appears to have played out far from the Frankish homelands. Ulrich Nonn (map p. 37, and pp. 99–100), following his teacher Eugen Ewig, believes that the exile story reflects a real sequence of events whereby Childeric was a leader of "Salian" or "Belgian" Franks based in the Romanized areas conquered by Chlodio, who were allies under the lordship of Aegidius, but eventually able to take over his power when he and his imperial patron died. (Childeric's son Clovis I later fought Aegidius' son Syagrius who was remembered as a King of Romans, and who had control of Soissons in the south of *Belgica Secunda*.)

In a passage normally considered to have come from a lost collection of annals, Gregory (II.18) gives a sequence of events which are very difficult to interpret. In 463 Childeric and Aegidius successfully repelled the Visigoths of Theodoric II from Orléans on the Loire. After the death of Aegidius soon after, Childeric and a *comes* ("count") Paul are recorded defending the Loire region from Saxon raiders, who were possibly coordinating with the Goths now under Euric. Childeric and Paul fought Saxons under the command of a leader named "Adovacrius" (sometimes given by modern authors in either an Anglo-Saxon spelling form, Eadwacer, or in a spelling the same as used for his contemporary the future King of Italy Odoacer, with whom he is sometimes equated). The origin of these "Saxons" is however unclear, and they are described as being based upon islands somewhere in the Loire region.

BASINA OF THURINGIA

Basina or Basine (c. 438 – 477) was remembered as a queen of Thuringia in the middle of the fifth century, by much later authors such as especially Gregory of Tours. However, because Gregory described her family's kingdom of Thuringia as being on the Gaulish or western side of the river Rhine, it is sometimes thought to be the Civitas Tungrorum, which is now Belgium.

Gregory of Tours reported that Childeric I was exiled from Roman Gaul for a period, and during that time he went to the kingdom of Thuringia. When he returned, Basina came with him, although she had allegedly been married to the king there, Bisinus.[2] She herself took the initiative to ask for the hand of Childeric I, king of the Franks, and married him. For as she herself said, "I want to have the most powerful man in the world, even if I have to cross the ocean for him".

Childeric and Basina were the parents of the Frankish king Clovis I, who is remembered as the first medieval king to rule Gaul.

According to the *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium*, the Frankish King Ragnachar, and his brother Richar, from the area of Cambrai were related to Basina.

MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

Gregory of Tours, in his *History of the Franks*, mentions several siblings of Clovis within his narrative, apparently thus children of Childeric:

- Clovis I (died 511), whose mother was Basina.
- Audofleda, Queen of the Ostrogoths, wife of Theodoric the Great. Gregory also mentions their daughter Amalasuntha.
- Lanthechild. Gregory mentions she had been an Arian but converted to Catholicism with Clovis.
- Albofleda (died approximately 500). Gregory mentions that she died soon after being baptized with Clovis.

AUDOFLEDA

Audofleda (c. 467 – c. 511), was a Gothic queen of the Ostrogothic Kingdom by marriage to Theoderic the Great.

She was the sister of Clovis I, King of the Franks. She married Theoderic the Great, King of the Ostrogoths (471–526), around 493 AD (exact date unknown). Theoderic sent an embassy to Clovis to request the marriage. This political move allied Theoderic with the Franks, and by marrying his daughters off to the kings of the Burgundians, the Vandals, and the Visigoths, he allied himself with every major 'Barbarian' kingdom in the West.

Audofleda was a pagan prior to her marriage, and was baptised at the time of her wedding by an Arian bishop. Theoderic and Audofleda had one daughter, Amalasuntha, who ruled the Ostrogoths from 526 until 534.

LANTECHILDIS

Lantechildis (or **Lenteildis**) was a Frankish noblewoman, the daughter of the Frankish king Childeric I (d. 481) and the Thuringian noblewoman Basina (d. 477). She was a sister of Clovis I. She is mentioned in Gregory of Tours and the *Liber historiae Francorum*.

Lantechildis converted to Arianism and received Arian baptism. She may have been influenced to convert after her sister Audofleda converted at her marriage to the Ostrogothic king Theoderic the Great. Later she converted again and received a Catholic baptism like her brother and sister, Albofledis. Clovis' baptism took place between 496/498 and 508/509. Her conversion from heresy was the subject of a sermon by Bishop Avitus of Vienne entitled in Latin *Homilia de conversione Lenteildis Chlodovaei sororis*, "Homily on the conversion of Clovis' sister Lenteildis". Avitus preached the sermon at her baptism.

ALBOFLEDIS

Albofledis (or **Albochledis**) was a Frankish noblewoman, the daughter of the Frankish king Childeric I (d. 481) and the Thuringian noblewoman Basina (d. 477). She was a sister of Clovis I. According to Gregory of Tours, she was baptised on the same day as her brother. This event has been dated as early as 496 or as late as 509. At the time she dedicated herself to a life of perpetual virginity, but she died not long after. Bishop Remigius of Reims addressed a letter of consolation to Clovis on the occasion of her death. This letter is quoted in part by Gregory, and is also included in full in the collection known as the *Epistolae Austrasicae*. Although Gregory spells her name Albofledis, the scribe of the *Epistolae* gives Albochledis. Remigius describes her as "chosen by God", *a deo electa*.

Some historians are of the opinion that Albofledis is the same person as Audofleda and that Clovis had only two sisters, the other being Lantechildis.

DEATH

Childeric is generally considered to have died in 481 or 482 based on Gregory's reports that his son Clovis died in 511 and had ruled 30 years.

TOMB

Childeric's tomb was discovered in 1653 not far from the 12th-century church of Saint-Brice in Tournai, now in Belgium. Numerous precious objects were found, including jewels of gold and garnet cloisonné, gold coins, a gold bull's head, and a ring with the king's name inscribed. Some 300 golden winged insects (usually viewed as bees or cicadas) were also found which had been placed on the king's cloak. Archduke Leopold William, governor of the Southern Netherlands (today's Belgium), had the find published in Latin. The treasure went first to the Habsburgs in Vienna, then as a gift to King Louis XIV of France, who was not impressed with the treasure and stored it in the royal library, which became the Bibliothèque Nationale de France during the Revolution.

On the night of November 5–6, 1831, the treasure of Childeric was among 80 kg of treasure stolen from the Library and melted down for the gold. A few pieces were retrieved from where they had been hidden in the Seine, including two of the bees. The record of the treasure, however, now exists only in the fine engravings made at the time of its discovery and in some reproductions made for the Habsburgs.

When Napoleon was looking for a heraldic symbol to trump the Capetian fleur-de-lys, he settled on Childeric's bees as symbols of the French Empire. The minutes of a meeting of the *Conseil d'État* held at Saint-Cloud in June 1804 suggest that it approved the symbolism of the bees on a suggestion by Cambacérès. The design was made by Vivant Denon, Director of the Louvre.

Detail of golden bees with garnet insets from Childeric's tomb.